

COMMENTARIES IN CULTURAL ENTOMOLOGY

1. DEFINITION OF CULTURAL ENTOMOLOGY¹

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Note: This is the first in a series of short articles which I plan to publish at irregular intervals on the various aspects of the manifold ways in which insects have colored human culture. Most will be short notes of original findings and interpretations but I want also to provide exposure to unknown or obscure materials buried in literature not readily available, understood or seen by the entomologist. No systematic bibliographic source recognizes the subject and items usually appear only to one who looks for them in old or non-entomological works (often in foreign languages) such as ethnographic and anthropological serials, historical manuscripts and early travel accounts. No attempt will be made to confine publication to a single journal, but I will reference each note by numerals in sequence and cite at appropriate times where same may be found.

A people's culture refers to all of their beliefs and activities. It is possible for a historian or anthropologist to define a human group by its morphological or behavioral attributes. Such characteristics may be divided into three categories: First, we have those concerned with bodily survival, such as food acquisition, shelter construction, transportation, etc., all of which comprise technology. Second, there are the academic pursuits, knowledge gathering and organizing, which we call science. And third, one can group activities which humans practice for "the nourishment of the mind and soul," the arts and humanities.

It is this last set of endeavors, perhaps, more than those of the first two, that give identity to a human cultural group. They are the expression of the true attitude or "essence" of a people for they are concerned with life's meaning to them, not just its function. It is the influence of insects in this aspect of humanity that is the focus of what I call **cultural entomology**.

In my own excursions into the subject I have been amazed at the extent to which insects have invaded the world's cultures, ancient, primitive and modern. Hardly an ethnic unit exists whose customs and beliefs do not exhibit at least some facet with entomological beginnings or connections, a fact not widely appreciated even among ethnozoologists, let alone general anthropologists and historians. Often the effect has been so corrupted or modified by time and telling that it is scarcely still recognizable, an example being the derivation of today's idea of a soul and resurrection from the past symbolic example of insect metamorphosis. But others are purely plain, as the delight we all find in the beauty of the butterfly's wing.

There are only a few cultural entomologists known to me and general publications on the subject are limited. Certainly the field's dean is

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Austria's Erwin Schimitschek whose "Insekten als Nahrung, in Brachtum, Kult und Kulture" (Schimitschek, 1968) ought to be the starting place for the student. Lucy W. Clausen made a basic contribution likewise with "Insect Fact and Folklore" (Clausen, 1954) a very popular treatise which, more than any other, has introduced the subject to the English speaking world.

As evidenced by the bibliography given below, many other entomologists have made contributions to certain areas of the overall field. My colleague Steven Kutcher, of Long Beach, California, has lectured on cultural entomology and taught classes in "Insect Appreciation" designed specifically for providing insight into the reasons insects should be considered for their inspirational and historical nature as much as for their scientific or economic importance.

And in this context, I should mention here the various "entomophilosophers" such as William Morton Wheeler, Maurice Maeterlinck, and Jean Henri Fabre, probably the three most famous, who not only described insect phenomena with imagination and brilliance but wrote and spoke of their meaning on a human intellectual plane: "...whither do they go, what befalls them, what becomes of them when they are dead? Why smile at these questions when they are asked of insects, and take them seriously when they relate to man?" (Maeterlinck: *The Life of the Ant*).

For organizational purposes I recognize the following specific subdivisions of human endeavor as cultural and in which insects may play roles:

1. Literature (fictional, not scientific or informative)
2. Music
3. Performing arts (including drama and dance)
4. Art (including decoration and architecture)
5. History (interpretive)
6. Philosophy (including ethics, metaphysics)
7. Religion
8. Folklore (including mythology, customs)
9. Language
10. Symbolism (including emblemology, heraldry, advertising, etc.)
11. Sociology (including law, politics, government and warfare)
12. Recreation (including toys, games, amusements, novelties, jokes, oddities, and curiosities)

When study of the entomological aspects of any of these areas pertains to a so-called primitive or non-civilized (i.e., aboriginal or prehistorical) society we may refer to it as *ethnoentomology* (although the ethnoentomologist may study scientific and technological aspects as well). This field is growing in importance along side of ethnobotany, ethnopharmacology, etc.

It is difficult to assemble the contributions to cultural entomology. As mentioned in the note preceding this article, there is no recognition of the subject in bibliographies and data banks and part of the reason for this series of articles is to provide a portal to the literature. The selected citations given below represent only the more comprehensive works of which I am aware and I hope readers may add to the list. I have on file also a number of specialized references and examples (and artifacts) of insects in culture which will be used as source material for review and study. To this, I invite inquiry and contributions.

General

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Ritchie, C.I.A. 1979. Insects, the creeping conquerors. Elsevier/Nelson Books, New York. 139 p.
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Herfs, A. 1963. Entomologica in litteris. Zeitschrift für Angewandte Entomologie 1963: 151-159.
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Performing Arts

- Miller, D. 1948. Shakespearean entomology. Tuatara 1(2): 7-12.

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Wilkinson, R.W. 1969. Colloquia entomologica II. A remarkable sale of Victorian entomological jewelry. Michigan Entomologist 2: 77-81.

History

- Cloudsley-Thompson, J.L. 1976. Insects and history. St. Martin's Press, New York, 242 p.

Philosophy

A neglected area.

Religion

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Folklore

- Weiss, H.B. 1930. Insects and witchcraft. New York Entomological Society, Journal 38: 127-133.
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Language

- Sones, W. 1979. Our bug-infested language. The Explorer 21(1): 23.

Symbolism

- Gagliardi, R.A. 1976. The butterfly and moth as symbols in Western Art. Master's thesis, Southern Connecticut State College. xxxii, 199 p.
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Sociology

- Leclercq, M. 1969. Entomology and legal medicine, chap. 13 in Leclercq, M. 1969. Entomological Parasitology. Pergamon Press, Oxford. xv, 158 p.

Recreation

- Hogue, C.L. 1979. The bugfolk. Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, Terra 17(4): 36-38.
 Stanley, W.F. ed. 1979. Insects and other invertebrates of the world on stamps. American Topical Assoc., Milwaukee. 148p.
 Taylor, R.L. & Carter, B.J. 1976. Entertaining with insects. Or: The original guide to insect cookery. Woodbridge Press Publishing Co., Santa Barbara. 159 p.
 Tweedie, M.W.F. 1968. Pleasure from insects. David and Charles, Newton Abbot. 170 p.
 Villiard, P. 1973. Insects as pets. Doubleday & Company, Inc., New York. 143 p.

Ethnoentomology

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